

Claims

What is claimed is:

1. A trackable postage stamp comprising:
  - a first surface;
  - 5 a second surface opposite the first surface and adapted to adhere to a piece of mail; and
  - a passive tracking device including stamp identification (ID) information.
2. The postage stamp of claim 1, wherein the passive tracking device  
10 includes a miniature bar code disposed on the first surface of the stamp.
3. The postage stamp of claim 1, wherein the passive tracking device includes a radio frequency identification (RFID) device.
- 15 4. The postage stamp of claim 1, wherein the stamp ID information includes encrypted data corresponding to at least two of a date, a location, a postage value, and a unique designation.
5. The postage stamp of claim 4, wherein encrypted data are combined to at  
20 least partially yield the stamp ID information.
6. The postage stamp of claim 1, wherein the passive tracking device is coupled to one of the first surface and the second surface.
- 25 7. The postage stamp of claim 1, wherein the stamp identification (ID) information is unique to each stamp.

8. A postage stamp dispensing system comprising:
  - a plurality of postage stamps, each stamp including a tracking device that includes stamp ID information;
  - a stamp dispenser adapted to contain and dispense the stamps;
  - 5 a reader operatively associated with the stamp dispenser to read the stamp ID information when the relative position between the stamp and the reader changes; and
  - a database operable to store the read stamp ID information.
- 10 9. The system of claim 8, wherein each tracking device includes a bar code.
10. The system of claim 8, wherein each tracking device includes a radio frequency identification (RFID) device.
- 15 11. The system of claim 10, wherein the RFID device is passive.
12. The system of claim 8, wherein the stamp ID information includes encrypted data corresponding to at least two of a date, a location, a postage value, and a unique designation.
- 20 13. The postage stamp of claim 12, wherein encrypted data are combined to at least partially yield the stamp ID information.
14. The system of claim 13, wherein the encrypted data that makes up the 25 stamp ID information is stored as separate values in the database.

15. The system of claim 12, wherein the dispenser is a vending machine and the device reader is part of the vending machine.

16. The system of claim 12, wherein a portion of the plurality of stamps are 5 arranged in a book and the book includes book identification data.

17. The system of claim 16, wherein the reader is operable to read the book identification data and the database is operable to store the book identification data.

10 18. The system of claim 8, further comprising an imaging device operatively associated with the stamp dispenser to capture an image of the user of the stamp dispenser.

19. A method of tracking a postage stamp, the method comprising:
  - coupling tracking information to the stamp, the tracking information including a stamp ID;
  - dispensing the stamp to a customer;
  - 5 reading the tracking information as the stamp is dispensed; and
  - storing the stamp ID in a database.
20. The method of claim 19, further comprising capturing an image of the customer and storing the captured image in the database.
- 10 21. The method of claim 19, wherein the tracking information includes a passive RFID device.
22. The method of claim 19, further comprising storing a dispensing location 15 within the database.
23. The method of claim 19, further comprising reading the tracking information as the stamp is deposited into a postal mailbox, and storing the stamp ID and a mailbox location within a database.
- 20 24. The method of claim 23, further comprising comparing the mailbox location and the dispensing location, and identifying the stamp if the mailbox location is more than a predefined distance from the dispensing location.

25. The method of claim 19, further comprising  
sensing when an article is deposited in a mailbox;  
determining when tracking information was not properly read for all the  
5 articles placed in the mailbox; and.

providing a perceivable indication when it has been determined that  
tracking information was not properly read for all the articles placed in the mailbox.

26. The method of claim 19, wherein the dispensing step includes dispensing  
10 the stamp as part of a book of stamps, and wherein the book includes book identification  
information.

27. The method of claim 26, wherein the reading step also includes reading  
the book identification information, and the storing step also includes storing the book ID  
15 in the database.

28. The method of claim 27, wherein the database includes a list of individual  
stamp IDs associated with the book ID.